Tuesday morning, Oct. 14, 2014

Hi everyone,

Thanks for another great learning experience for me yesterday. I’m writing to provide some feedback and perspective that may be helpful. But before I do, I’ll ask you for some help. I don’t know quite what to do about my experience in the back of the classroom. It’s hard to hear what’s going on and maybe we should get the people in the back to move up. The people around me are in a completely different environment than the one I imagined for the class. Computers are on FaceBook, students are carrying on active conversations via text messaging, students are paying video games, and working on papers. One student leaves immediately after the reading quiz. None of this is in the syllabus, and so there is no grade for paying attention, although there is a grade for the final exam that will draw from listening to the presentations. Can you help me with this situation, what should I do? Could we agree that if you don’t want to be there, you should leave, or go to the back corner? Should we control each other and shout “media violation!!!” when we see someone who is not present and make them bring cookies for their atrocity? Should we have quizzes at the beginning *and* end of class? Should there be spankings? Or is my discomfort simply a manifestation of some maladjustment on my part, and I should take it up with a good psychiatrist? Anyway, I’d appreciate it if you could give this some thought.

Again, like Tuesday, I assigned a “10” to all the groups because 100% of my stated expectations were realized: The group formed an idea, started researching, and presented it. I provide some feedback below. My feedback often appears critical to me. I don’t mean it to be this way. If this seems demoralizing, remember that these are *difficult* problems. We are learning as we go along. I write more for some than others – neither means that you are doing well or not well. I just have more to say sometimes than others.

Chocolate Group: The group proposes to produce a guide to support maintenance of chocolate making businesses in Africa. I think that this is a reasonable start. However, my limited experience would indicate that the sustainability of a business requires local resilience: local experts, knowledge of how to source parts, local politics, etc. While I don’t think that a guide would make a difference to them, I think it is a great place to start for your group. I like that you are engaging in the chocolate making process here at home. In my opinion, it is important to be doing it. Through this process, I encourage you to be asking the question of what it’s like for *them*.

Poop Group: I think that learning with and helping an NGO is a good idea. I think it would be good to look at how people are using these. It may be instrumental to ask why people are not accepting these toilets in India, but are accepting them in Haiti. What is our experience with these kinds of toilets here? Have you contacted the other potential contacts like Jamie?

Drowning in Malawi: I think it is important to get more information on the lives of the people you are addressing. Is there an NGO that you could partner with? I’m not sure, but it seems you are proposing to start an NGO, is this correct? There must be some organization near the area doing something related to what you are trying to do that you could communicate with, no? In thinking about the lives of the people in Malawi, I wonder what effect receiving a brochure about survival swimming and CPR would have to a poor family. I imagine that they would look at the pictures and pin it up on the wall if they liked the pictures. Then they would start a fire for dinner, maybe they would use the brochure to start the fire. This bodes the question, “OK, Pete, so what should we do?” the answer is that I don’t know. But I think that the solution could start with engagement and empathy. If there is a solution, it will most likely come with local empowerment. Does anyone in Malawi know how to swim? Do they care enough to visit the village? Could we teach an exchange student or someone from a village to swim so that they could go back? Could swimming be fun? Could we make a protected part of the river? What would that be like? What has been tried? I think that the most important thought is, “what would that be like?” Again, I don’t know, and I appreciate your efforts.

Menstruation in Nepal: I have so many questions about this:

* About how many people are we talking about? How many women are subject to this treatement?
* How does sequestering women in huts help determine who’s child is who’s? What’s going on in the village that this should be in doubt?
* When the woman is in the hut, how does her work get done?
* Who takes care of the kids? Who breastfeeds the infants? If the kids join her, at what age do they not stay with her?
* Is this all a trick that the women have devised? – One week a month, I get to go camping with some other women. Is there any element of camaraderie there?
* My understanding is that when women are together, their menstruation cycles often synchronize. If we put them together when they’re menstruating, this may be enough. Do we find that in some villages all the women are on the same cycle, and there’s absolute chaos in the village for a week out of every month?

Collaborative Education: As above, I am a little confused, and I must confess I don’t know anything about the place you are speaking about. What is Lao? Maybe this is the same as Laos. I looked it up and realized that it wasn’t exactly where I thought it would be. What are these people like? I think it might have been a good idea to start with a little background of who they are. Also, why did you pick this place? Who are you working with… I mean this two ways. What people in particular are you seeking to support and understand? And are you working with a nonprofit or other organization of some kind?